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[Protesters turn up heat on Duke's big rate hike](#)

By Lisa Sorg

No commotion. No clapping. No signs. No singing.

With the rules of decorum laid out by Capitol Police, Duke Energy Progress District Manager Marty Clayton opened the rate hike hearing Monday night by telling the NC Utilities Commission, "We look forward to hearing from our customers this evening."

That may be true, but it had to be difficult to hear witness after witness lambaste your employer as "backward," "exploitative," "untrustworthy" "polluters."

More than 60 people testified before the state utilities commission — in tones ranging from anger to desperation to exasperation — urging the panel to deny Duke Energy Progress's request for a 16.7 percent rate increase for residential customers.

About three-quarters of the additional revenue from the residential rate hike — about \$477 million annually — would pay for Duke Energy's coal ash clean up. The rest would be allocated to modernizing the grid, recovering from Hurricane Matthew, recouping expenses from a failed nuclear project and switching to "clean energy." However that includes natural gas, which, as many speakers pointed out, is still a polluting fossil fuel.

"I understand the need for Duke to recoup its losses from storm damage," said Patricia Walker of Raleigh, "but not coal ash. They and they alone are responsible for the cost of cleaning up the ash pits. There is no justification for Duke Energy to foist the costs onto customers."

The notion that Duke Progress customers should pay for the utility's mismanagement of its coal ash ponds and basins — for which the company was fined a record \$102 million — was unanimously galling. "What deterrent is there if we pay the penalty?" said Dewey Botts of Zebulon.

About 2 million customers would be affected by the rate increase. It would equate to about \$18 extra a month for homes that use 1,000 kilowatt hours. But that figure tells only part of the story.

Inefficient homes, common in low-income neighborhoods and among rental properties, can use twice that, potentially jacking up the monthly bill to twice that amount. Industrial and commercial customers would see their rates rise by an average of 11 percent. With that revenue, Duke would generate a total of \$647 million annually.

Robert Rodriguez of Raleigh encouraged Duke Energy to wean itself off coal and natural gas. While Duke is providing a percentage of its electricity from renewables — 6 percent of 2014 retail sales, as required by state law — Rodriguez urged the utility to "aggressively pursue renewable energy."

Two members of the commission's public staff — tasked with representing the ratepayers — sat at one table. Across the room Dwight Allen, Duke Energy's attorney, sat alone, flanked by TV cameras pointing into the crowd. He took notes, sporadically finishing a thought by jabbing the paper with his pen.

Allen, who is from eastern North Carolina, occasionally cross-examined witnesses, and at times, the exchange was testy, even in his Down East patois.

"How do you know you Duke Energy is profitable?" Allen asked one witness. "Did you read a financial statement?"

"I read it in the newspaper," the witness replied.

According to the Charlotte Observer, Duke posted a \$686 million profit in the second quarter of this year.

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